

Jackson council: Investigate Orthodox videos

Shannon Mullen and Jean Mikle, Asbury Park Press Published 7:08 p.m. ET July 27, 2016 | Updated 10:55 p.m. ET July 28, 2016

Township Council asks the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate. Meanwhile, an Orthodox Jewish official says a Yiddish term used in a viral video was misconstrued.



(Photo: Staff photo/Shannon Mullen)

- The Jackson Township Council wants the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate comments made by leaders from the Orthodox Jewish community in videos recently circulated through social media.
- The council believes the comment are evidence of neighborhood "blockbusting" efforts, but an Orthodox official says the comments are being misinterpreted.

JACKSON - Tensions have flared here again over a steady influx of homebuyers from the Orthodox Jewish community, this time over videos of talks given by Orthodox leaders that township officials say lend further credence to claims of neighborhood "blockbusting."

Calling some of the comments "reprehensible" and possibly illegal, Rob Nixon, the Township Council president, announced Tuesday night that the governing body is asking state authorities and the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate.

"Those videos very strongly indicated what I think many of us had feared or have attempted to prove, and that is there seems to be a cohesive attempt to blockbust our neighborhoods, to look at Jackson as a place to be taken over," Nixon said.



Jackson Council President Rob Nixon
(Photo: File photo)

However, a state representative of Agudath Israel of America, a national advocacy organization representing the interests of the Orthodox Jewish community, says the council and many local residents have misinterpreted and grossly over-reacted to the comments, portions of which are in Yiddish.

The talks were delivered in November during Agudath Israel's annual convention (<http://www.yourconvention.org/convention-videos/>) in Stamford, Connecticut.

In one video, Rabbi Shmuel Lefkowitz, the organization's vice president for community services, speaking on the topic of affordable housing opportunities, urged members of the Orthodox community seeking to buy homes to "keep pushing the envelope" beyond the borders of Lakewood into non-Jewish neighborhoods in surrounding towns.

"We've got to keep reaching out to Brick, Toms River, to Howell, to Jackson," he said.

"Someone who takes it upon themselves ... they could turn it around," he said, citing examples of sections of Lakewood where similar transitions occurred over time, including Coventry Square and A Country Place.

WATCH: Culture shock over Orthodox expansion (</story/news/local/communitychange/2016/03/18/orthodox-home-sales-jackson-toms-river/81091688/>)

Nowhere in the video, however, does Lefkowitz refer to the sort of aggressive real estate sales tactics historically associated with "blockbusting," a term that refers to the prohibited practice of trying to frighten or intimidate one group of homeowners into selling their homes to members of another group.

Sorry

Because of its privacy settings, this video cannot be played here.

Watch on Vimeo

LOST IN TRANSLATION?

Lefkowitz called on members of the Orthodox community to become “schtickle pioneers” willing to settle in outlying areas that don’t currently have the same ready access to synagogues, yeshivas and kosher markets that make enclaves like Lakewood so convenient and attractive for Orthodox families.

“There’s a mentality that everybody wants to live in the heart of the community, whether it’s Lakewood, Borough Park or Williamsburg,” Lefkowitz said. “It’s hard for people to get out of that.”

Many township residents learned of the Lefkowitz’s video through social media posts linking to a [story](http://www.shorennewsnetwork.com/2016/07/rabbi-brooklyn-jews-encouraged-to-be-shtickle-pioneers-to-settle-ocean-county/) (<http://www.shorennewsnetwork.com/2016/07/rabbi-brooklyn-jews-encouraged-to-be-shtickle-pioneers-to-settle-ocean-county/>), posted on a community news website, the Shore News Network, which characterized “schtickle” as a pejorative term.

“In Hebrew, the word schtickle refers to something of second class. In the term schtickle pioneer, as it pertains to Lakewood, means to settle in second class surrounding towns, in the hopes that enough growth would ‘turn around’ those communities.”



Rabbi Avi Schnall, director of the Agudath Israel of America’s New Jersey office. (Photo: File photo)

However, Avi Schnall, the state director of Agudath Israel for New Jersey, said that interpretation isn’t correct.

The [Jewish English Lexicon](http://www.jewish-languages.org/jewish-english-lexicon/words/1289) (<http://www.jewish-languages.org/jewish-english-lexicon/words/1289>), an online dictionary, says the word is Yiddish, not Hebrew. One definition of the word is a “designation of second-class status, when applied to rabbis or other professionals.” But the first definition the site provides is “a small amount, a little,” as in, “He’ll say anything to get a shtickle sympathy.” The TV comedy “Seinfeld” famously used the word in the a scene involving Jerry’s dentist titled [“Schtickle of Fluoride.”](https://youtu.be/OsWDohWkkC0) (<https://youtu.be/OsWDohWkkC0>).

“Schtickle means a piece, a small piece,” said Schnall.

“It’s the most ridiculous thing in the world that they would construe it to mean something negative.”

TAKING THE NEXT STEP

Allegations of blockbusting and attempted intimidation by aggressive real estate agents have rolled neighborhoods in Jackson, Toms River and Howell in the past year.

Residents in both Toms River and Jackson have complained of harassment and intimidation by some real estate agents, including threats of adverse outcomes if they did not sell their homes.

At the same time, some real estate agents say they have been harassed while visiting neighborhoods in search of homes for their clients.

Last year, Jackson adopted a no-knock ordinance that bars real estate solicitors from approaching homes displaying a no-knock sticker.

LETTER: [Stereotypes of Orthodox contradicted by the facts](https://www.shorenewsnetwork.com/2016/04/14/letter-stereotypes-orthodox-contradicted-facts/83035738/) (/story/opinion/readers/2016/04/14/letter-stereotypes-orthodox-contradicted-facts/83035738/)

Toms River went even further, adopting a [“cease and desist” law](https://www.shorenewsnetwork.com/2016/02/23/real-estate-soliciting-banned-2-toms-river-areas/80809280/) (/story/news/local/communitychange/2016/02/23/real-estate-soliciting-banned-2-toms-river-areas/80809280/) that allowed the township to ban real estate soliciting from two North Dover neighborhoods for five years.

After residents brought the videos to the Township Council's attention, the governing body authorized the township's legal counsel to request state and federal authorities to investigate further.

"I think we all agree that those comments are not only reprehensible but also have a tinge of illegality about them," Nixon said at the start of Tuesday's council meeting, adding, "And I certainly can't speak to whether they are or aren't legal."

Said Nixon: "We have done our level best to address what we can address at this level of government. So we had to take the next step, and that is to file this complaint."

Michael S. Nagurka, an attorney with Gillmore & Monahan in Toms River, drafted a letter to the U.S. Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division in Washington, D.C.

"While the Township takes no position on who buys property within its borders, some individuals have sought to purchase all homes on entire blocks of certain neighborhoods," Nagurka wrote. "Furthermore, at several public meetings, many residents have indicated that these individuals have used intimidation and fear in an attempt to accomplish these legal aims."

WATCH: Lakewood goes luxe (</story/news/local/communitychange/2016/06/26/lakewood-goes-luxe/85952252/>)

In the letter, Nagurka referenced sections of two videos, including the one of Lefkowitz's speech, as "evidence of potential violations." The letter doesn't elaborate further. The **other video** (<https://vimeo.com/147257375>) is of a talk by a Jersey City-based rabbi that was largely in Yiddish.

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